

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A system for processing biomass, comprising:  
a water-impermeable bottom liner;  
a gravel layer supported by the bottom liner;  
5 a drain pipe disposed within the gravel layer;  
a biomass input device operable to deliver biomass over  
the gravel layer to form a biomass pile;  
a lime input device operable to deliver lime to the  
biomass for pretreating the biomass;  
10 a distribution pipe elevated above the gravel layer; and  
a pump operable to circulate water through the biomass  
pile by delivering water to the distribution pipe and  
receiving water from the drain pipe after it has traveled  
through the biomass pile.

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2. The system of Claim 1, wherein the biomass is  
lignocellulosic biomass.

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3. The system of Claim 1, wherein the lignocellulosic  
biomass is selected from the group consisting of bagasse and  
corn stover.

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4. The system of Claim 1, wherein the gravel layer is  
approximately three feet thick.

5. The system of Claim 1, wherein the lime input device  
is operable to deliver lime to the biomass either during or  
after the delivering of the biomass over the gravel layer.

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6. The system of Claim 1, wherein the lime input device  
is operable to deliver lime to the biomass in an amount  
between approximately 10% and 30% of the biomass by weight.

7. The system of Claim 1, further comprising an inoculum input device operable to deliver an inoculum to the biomass pile for fermentation of the biomass pile.

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8. The system of Claim 1, further comprising a heat exchanger coupled to the distribution pipe and operable to control a temperature of the water that is delivered to the distribution pipe.

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9. The system of Claim 1, further comprising an air blower and an air distribution pipe operable to deliver air to the biomass pile.

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10. The system of Claim 9, further comprising a container of lime water slurry coupled to the air distribution pipe and operable to scrub the air of carbon dioxide before the air is delivered to the biomass pile.

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11. The system of Claim 1, further comprising a calcium carbonate input device operable to deliver calcium carbonate to the biomass for pretreating the biomass.

12. A system for processing biomass, comprising:  
a water-impermeable bottom liner;  
a grid-like lattice structure coupled to the bottom liner  
to form a roof;  
5 a geomembrane coupled to the grid-like lattice structure;  
a gravel layer supported by the bottom liner;  
a plurality of drain pipes disposed within the gravel  
layer;  
a conveyor belt coupled to the top liner and operable to  
10 deliver biomass over the gravel layer to form a biomass pile;  
a lime input device operable to deliver lime to the  
biomass for pretreating the biomass;  
a plurality of distribution pipes coupled to the top  
liner and associated with respective ones of the plurality of  
15 drain pipes; and  
a plurality of pumps coupled to respective ones of the  
plurality of drain pipes and respective ones of the plurality  
of distribution pipes, the pumps operable to circulate water  
through the biomass pile by delivering water to the  
20 distribution pipes and receiving water from the drain pipes  
after the water has traveled through the biomass pile.

13. The system of Claim 12, wherein the biomass is  
lignocellulosic biomass selected from the group consisting of  
25 bagasse and corn stover.

14. The system of Claim 12, wherein the grid-like  
lattice structure is formed from a plurality of I-beams in a  
general shape of a half cylinder.

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15. The system of Claim 12, further comprising a foam  
layer coupled to an outside of the geomembrane.

16. The system of Claim 12, further comprising a sugar extraction device operable to extract sugar from a raw feedstock to produce the biomass.

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17. The system of Claim 16, wherein the raw feedstock is selected from the group consisting of energy cane and sweet sorghum.

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18. The system of Claim 16, wherein the sugar extraction device comprises a plurality of adjacent extraction tanks, each extraction tank comprising:

a screw conveyor operable to deliver solid material from the raw feedstock in a downstream direction; and

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a weir operable to deliver liquid material from the raw feedstock in an upstream direction.

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19. The system of Claim 12, wherein the lime input device is operable to deliver lime to the biomass either during or after the delivering of the biomass over the gravel layer.

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20. The system of Claim 12, further comprising an inoculum input device operable to deliver an inoculum to the biomass pile for fermentation of the biomass pile.

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21. The system of Claim 12, further comprising a heat exchanger coupled to the distribution pipe and operable to control a temperature of the water that is delivered to the distribution pipe.

22. The system of Claim 12, further comprising an air blower and an air distribution pipe operable to deliver air to the biomass pile.

5        23. The system of Claim 22, further comprising a container of lime water slurry coupled to the air distribution pipe and operable to scrub the air of carbon dioxide before the air is delivered to the biomass pile.

10       24. The system of Claim 12, further comprising a calcium carbonate input device operable to deliver calcium carbonate to the biomass for pretreating the biomass.

25. A system for processing biomass, comprising:  
an end wall;

a water-impermeable bottom liner;

5 a top liner coupled to the bottom liner, the top liner  
selectively inflatable by one or more fans coupled to the end  
wall;

a plurality of water pouches coupled to the top liner,  
the water pouches selectively inflatable when the top liner is  
inflated;

10 a gravel layer supported by bottom liner and separated  
into a plurality of gravel segments;

a plurality of drain pipes disposed within respective  
ones of the gravel segments;

15 a conveyor belt associated with the end wall and operable  
to deliver biomass over the gravel segments to form a biomass  
pile;

a lime input device operable to deliver lime to the  
biomass for pretreating the biomass;

20 a plurality of distribution pipes coupled to the top  
liner and associated with respective ones of the plurality of  
gravel segments; and

25 a plurality of pumps coupled to respective ones of the  
plurality of drain pipes and respective ones of the plurality  
of distribution pipes, the pumps operable to circulate water  
through the biomass pile by delivering water to the  
distribution pipes and receiving water from the drain pipes  
after the water has traveled through the biomass pile.

30 26. The system of Claim 25, wherein the biomass is  
lignocellulosic biomass selected from the group consisting of  
bagasse and corn stover.

27. The system of Claim 25, further comprising an opening formed in the end wall for unloading residue left over from the biomass pile after fermentation.

5        28. The system of Claim 25, further comprising a sugar extraction device operable to extract sugar from a raw feedstock to produce the biomass.

10       29. The system of Claim 28, wherein the raw feedstock is selected from the group consisting of energy cane and sweet sorghum.

15       30. The system of Claim 28, wherein the sugar extraction device comprises a plurality of adjacent extraction tanks, each extraction tank comprising:

      a screw conveyor operable to deliver solid material from the raw feedstock in a downstream direction; and

      a weir operable to deliver liquid material from the raw feedstock in an upstream direction.

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31. The system of Claim 25, wherein the lime input device is operable to deliver lime to the biomass either during or after the delivering of the biomass over the gravel layer.

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32. The system of Claim 25, further comprising an inoculum input device operable to deliver an inoculum to the biomass pile for fermentation of the biomass pile.

30       33. The system of Claim 25, further comprising a heat exchanger coupled to the distribution pipe and operable to

control a temperature of the water that is delivered to the distribution pipe.

34. The system of Claim 25, further comprising an air  
5 blower and an air distribution pipe operable to deliver air to the biomass pile.

35. The system of Claim 34, further comprising a  
10 container of lime water slurry coupled to the air distribution pipe and operable to scrub the air of carbon dioxide before the air is delivered to the biomass pile.

36. The system of Claim 25, further comprising a calcium  
15 carbonate input device operable to deliver calcium carbonate to the biomass for pretreating the biomass.

37. A system for processing biomass, comprising:  
a plurality of geodesic domes arranged in a generally  
circular pattern, each geodesic dome comprising:  
a water-impermeable bottom liner;  
5 a top liner coupled to the bottom liner;  
a gravel layer supported by the bottom liner;  
a drain pipe disposed within the gravel layer; and  
a distribution pipe elevated above the gravel layer;  
a plurality of pumps coupled to respective ones of the  
10 plurality of geodesic domes, each pump operable to circulate  
water through its respective geodesic dome by delivering water  
to the distribution pipe associated with the respective  
geodesic dome and receiving water from the drain pipe  
associated with the respective geodesic dome;  
15 a rotatable conveyor belt surrounded by the geodesic  
domes and operable to deliver biomass to each geodesic dome;  
and  
a lime input device operable to deliver lime to the  
biomass for pretreating the biomass.

20 38. The system of Claim 37, wherein the biomass is  
lignocellulosic biomass selected from the group consisting of  
bagasse and corn stover.

25 39. The system of Claim 37, wherein each top liner  
comprises a plurality of hexagonal or pentagonal panels  
coupled to one another with lips associated with each panel.

30 40. The system of Claim 37, further comprising a foam  
layer coupled to an outside of the top liner.

41. The system of Claim 37, wherein the lime input device is operable to deliver lime to the biomass either during or after the delivering of the biomass over the gravel layer.

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42. The system of Claim 37, further comprising a calcium carbonate input device operable to deliver calcium carbonate to the biomass for pretreating the biomass.

43. A system for processing biomass, comprising:  
a fermenter structure configured to:  
accept and store untreated lignocellulosic biomass;  
pretreat the lignocellulosic biomass with lime at a  
5 temperature between approximately 25°C and 95°C at ambient  
pressure for a time period of at least approximately four  
weeks; and  
treat the lignocellulosic biomass with an inoculant.

44. A method of biomass pretreatment comprising:  
adding an alkali to biomass with lignin content to  
produce a mixture; and  
incubating the mixture at a temperature between  
5 approximately 25°C and 95°C at ambient pressure.

45. The method of Claim 44, further comprising  
incubating the mixture for a time period of at least  
approximately 4 weeks.

46. The method of Claim 44, further comprising  
incubating the mixture for a time period of between  
approximately 4 and 16 weeks.

47. The method of Claim 44, further comprising selecting  
the duration of incubation based on incubation temperature.

48. The method of Claim 44, wherein the biomass  
comprises lignocellulosic biomass.

49. The method of Claim 44, wherein the biomass  
comprises agricultural waste.

50. The method of Claim 44, wherein the biomass is  
selected from the group consisting of:  
bagasse, corn stover and combinations thereof.

51. The method of Claim 44, further comprising  
circulating water through the biomass during incubation.

52. The method of Claim 44, further comprising  
circulating air through the biomass during incubation.

53. The method of Claim 44, further comprising circulating oxygen enriched air through the biomass during incubation.

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54. The method of Claim 44, wherein the alkali comprises lime.

55. The method of Claim 44, wherein the alkali comprises calcium oxide.

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56. The method of Claim 54, further comprising adding approximately 0.5 grams of lime per gram of biomass to produce the mixture.

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57. The method of Claim 54, further comprising adding approximately 0.1 to 0.5 grams of lime per gram of biomass to produce the mixture.

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58. The method of Claim 54, further comprising adding lime to the biomass in an amount between approximately 10% and 30% of biomass by weight.

59. The method of Claim 44, further comprising adding calcium carbonate to the mixture.

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60. The method of Claim 44, further comprising incubating the mixture at a temperature between approximately 25°C and 90°C.

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61. The method of Claim 44, further comprising incubating the mixture at a temperature between approximately 25°C and 57°C.

5        62. The method of Claim 44, further comprising selecting the incubation temperature based on the partial pressure of water at the selected temperature.

10       63. The method of Claim 44, further comprising increasing the enzyme digestibility of the biomass.

64. The method of Claim 44, further comprising producing pulp.

15       65. The method of Claim 64, further comprising producing pulp suitable for paper or cardboard production.

20       66. The method of Claim 44, further comprising reducing the lignin content of the biomass.

67. The method of Claim 66, further comprising reducing lignin content by at least approximately 98%.

25       68. The method of Claim 66, further comprising reducing lignin content by at least approximately 90%.

69. The method of Claim 66, further comprising reducing lignin content by at least approximately 29%.

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71. The method of Claim 66, further comprising reducing lignin content by at least approximately 67%.

72. The method of Claim 66, further comprising reducing  
5 lignin content by alkaline oxidation.

73. The method of Claim 44, further comprising fermenting the biomass after incubation.

10 74. The method of Claim 73, further comprising adding an inoculum to the mixture after incubation.

75. The method of Claim 73, further comprising collecting carboxylate salts from the mixture.

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76. The method of Claim 73, further comprising placing the mixture prior to incubation in a storage facility suitable for incubation and fermentation.

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77. A method for producing enzymatically digestible biomass comprising:

adding lime to biomass with lignin content to produce a mixture;

5 incubating the mixture at a temperature between approximately 25°C and 55°C at ambient pressure for a time period of at least approximately 4 to 16 weeks;

circulating water through the mixture during incubation.

10 78. The method of Claim 72, further comprising circulating air through the mixture during incubation.

79. The method of Claim 77, further comprising reducing the lignin content of the biomass by at least approximately  
15 67%.

80. The method of Claim 22, further comprising reducing the lignin content of the biomass by at least approximately  
20 32%.

81. The method of Claim 22, further comprising fermenting the biomass after incubation.

82. A method for producing pulp comprising:  
adding lime to biomass with lignin content to produce a  
mixture;

incubating the mixture at a temperature between  
5 approximately 45°C and 55°C at ambient pressure for a time  
period of approximately 10 weeks;

circulating water through the mixture during incubation.

83. The method of Claim 82, further comprising  
10 circulating air through the mixture during incubation.

84. The method of Claim 82, further comprising reducing  
the lignin content of the biomass by at least approximately  
90%.

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85. The method of Claim 82, further comprising reducing  
the lignin content of the biomass by at least approximately  
40%.

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86. The method of Claim 82, further comprising producing  
paper or cardboard from the biomass after incubation.